

TRIBUTE TO PROF. BELGRAD

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Abstract: A short essay commemorating the life of Eric A. Belgrad.

Tribute to Prof. Eric Belgrad

The Chinese have a beautiful blessing: “May you live in interesting times.” Eric was a blessing. He lived during the most important and turbulent times of the twentieth century and experienced firsthand some of the most exciting but destructive events in human history. Eric was born in Germany, and was four years old when Hitler invaded Poland. But Eric learned about the horrors of Nazism a year earlier, in 1938, during the Kristallen Nacht, when his father was arrested in the middle of the night and taken to the Nazi camp of Dachau. Miraculously, Eric’s father was released and returned home a few week later, and the family fled Germany and found refuge in Belgium. In 1948, when Eric was thirteen, his family moved to the US.

Eric did not like to talk about his difficult years as a child in occupied Europe, surviving the worst human atrocities known to mankind, and I, also a descendent of survivors of the Holocaust, tried to avoid the subject. However, when we met every few weeks, over a glass of wine at the Pikesville Hilton on Friday afternoons, we did find the courage to talk about the unthinkable. Our Friday meetings commenced when we were working on our book. The bar at the Pikesville Hilton was Eric’s favorite meeting place. It was somewhat surrealistic. We were sitting comfortably on soft couches, listening to background music, sipping good, dry red wine, while discussing the most horrific and sadistic historical events that the human mind had created.

I first met Eric in 1992, when I moved to Baltimore from New Mexico and was looking for a teaching job. Eric interviewed me in his capacity as the Chairperson of the department. My first impression of Eric was: He is so European. So elegant. What a change from my previous life experience as an instructor in New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment. He was wearing a colorful bow tie, his French goatee was perfectly trimmed, his questions were short and to the point, and most importantly, he was very, very cordial, formal, respectful, and polite. I could not miss his European upbringing. I later learned that Eric was a descendent of West European assimilated intellectual Jews, who adopted German and French education and culture. It brought to mind Hannah Arendt’s observation, “It is important to bear in mind that assimilation as a group phenomenon really existed only among Jewish intellectuals. ...Assimilation in the sense of acceptance by non-Jewish society, was granted them only as long as they were clearly distinguished exceptions from the Jewish masses even though they still shared the same restricted and humiliating political conditions.”¹ Eric was totally assimilated but continued to maintain his Jewish identity.

He rejected and harshly criticized the traditional East European norms and ways of life of orthodox Jews; he labeled them “black coats” because they wore traditional long black coats.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. London: Trinity Press, 1973, p.56.

For Eric, the world for Jews was not the same after the Holocaust. “How can anyone believe in God after Auschwitz?” He asked. He cut off ties with his father who was very religious and strictly followed the old Jewish orthodox traditions. For Eric, he was one of the “black coats.” Eric became an “atheist Jew,” and these feelings were strengthened by his beloved late wife, Gloria, who grew up in Canada, as a daughter to a family of secular Jews. I shared Eric and Gloria’s outlooks about Jewish orthodoxies and secularism. I was born in Israel to refugee parents who escaped Nazi Europe in 1933. In the early 1930’s many Jews could escape Nazi Europe but were encouraged by orthodox leaders to stay. No harm could come to them, they were told, as long as they follow religious orthodox practices; “God will save them.” Indeed, the early immigrants to Israel were secular Jews who were aware of the looming storm and fled Europe to Palestine.

Both Eric and Gloria felt a strong bond to Israel. They followed closely events in Israel, and were especially impressed by the Israeli military establishment. For Eric, the Israeli military, the IDF, was a microcosm of the “Changed Jew.” Gloria, more than Eric, was militaristic. She believed that Israel’s survival was dependent on the strength of its military. She spoke highly of the Israeli soldiers, who defended the newly created state of Israel against its numerous Arab enemies. It was difficult for Gloria, who hardly experienced severe antisemitism and grew up in quiet and peaceful Montreal, to understand why Israel’s Arab neighbors would want to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. On one of my trips to Israel, Gloria asked me if I could get her a miniature gold charm of an Uzi, the famous Israeli gun. She wanted to add the Uzi to a charm bracelet that she had and loved. I could not find an Uzi charm in Israel, so Robert, their son, the artist, made a golden Uzi charm for her. Eric and Gloria’s attachments to Israel deepened when their daughter Allison married an Israeli engineer whom she met in Baltimore, and moved to Haifa, with their family. The three grandsons enlisted and served in the Israeli military; one joined the paratroopers, and another grandson joined the Israeli navy. The youngest served in the army. To his great chagrin, Eric could not visit them in Haifa because of his poor health, but he was compensated and delighted when they came to visit him in Baltimore during long summer vacations.

During our long discussions about our book on humanitarian aid and refugees, it became clear to me that we did not choose the topic of our book incidentally; Eric and I immersed ourselves in the subject of war, violence, human cruelty, and the painful issue of refugees, probably because these problems touched us personally. Perhaps, we were plunging into our similar past, trying to explore and understand the causes and effects of humanitarian disasters. Eric’s opening sentences in the book say it all: “The juxtaposition of the terms ‘politics’ and ‘humanitarian aid’ in the title of this book was hardly fortuitous. It was designed to reflect a fundamental dichotomy characteristic of virtually all aid programs: the humanitarian impulse to relieve the suffering of the victims of war, famine, disease, or natural disasters tends to run counter to the self-serving motives that normally animate the pursuit of national interests.”² Eric’s compassion and empathy to victims of wars and other disasters is seen in every paragraph of his writing. Interestingly, Belgium, the country that provided shelter for Eric’s family during World War II, was the first country in the world to experience an international humanitarian air operation, following the ravages that Belgium suffered during World War I. “Belgium, whose

² Eric Belgrad, “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid,” in Eric Belgrad and Nitza Nachmias, eds., *The Politics of International Humanitarian Aid Operations*, London: Praeger, 1997, p. xiii.

violated neutrality and brutal occupation had been central focus of allied propaganda during the conflict, was identified early as most deserving of aid. Belgium therefore, became the first beneficiary of postwar American relief effort headed by Herbert Hoover. ... This became the first official humanitarian relief effort sponsored and controlled by the U.S. government.”³

The concept of “Responsibility to Protect,” or the responsibility of nations to alleviate human suffering through concerted international effort, is a relatively new concept. It involves national as well as international organizations, private enterprises and individual donors. Eric’s work raised the conceptual, strategic and political dilemmas involved in humanitarian aid. His brilliant analytical discussion shows dilemmas and ambivalence paramount to the subject, dilemmas that are as relevant today as they were when the book was published. Eric was critical of the resources that wealthy nations allocated to humanitarian aid, as well as the donors’ motives. Arguing that, “A defensible test of the validity of any governmental humanitarian aid program might be, not whether the donor will derive some benefit from the program, but whether recipients are likely to benefit as much from the program as the donor,” he concluded, “It is not unreasonable to expect donors to seek some political advantage in connection with succoring these needs.”⁴ I hate to admit that I did not initially recognize the verb “succoring,” as well as many other verbs, nouns, and pronouns that Eric used in his writings. Eric was a magician and a true connoisseur of the English language. While his arguments were analytical, precise, and very clear, his vocabulary was infinite. Eric showed me how the English language could and should be used, but most importantly, how to enjoy it. While I often felt intimidated by Eric’s proficiency with the English language, I am forever grateful to him for showing me its beauty and richness.

Eric addressed the shortcoming of aid programs through the eyes of the victims, but he did not ignore the major human dilemmas involved in helping them. His analytical review of the concept of international humanitarian aid clearly demonstrates the ambivalent motives of the donors, as well as the motives, needs and feelings of the recipients. Eric warned the donors against destroying the recipients’ dignity and humanity while succoring their needs. The refugees are indeed devastated, and in a dire need for aid, but their need for aid should not destroy their dignity and self-respect. “The need for charity must be particularly galling,” he wrote, “for emerging states attempting to assert their national independence after a usually long and demeaning period of colonial subservience.”⁵ While emerging nations often experience civil wars, political chaos, and extreme human suffering, donors should be careful to maintain the recipients’ national dignity and sense of independence when providing aid. Eric considered the issue of self-respect and maintaining the dignity and autonomy of the recipients of international aid a major principle, albeit in the literature it is secondary to the national interest principle.

During our work on the manuscript, I was introduced not only to Eric’s conceptual and analytical thinking but also to his love of art, painting and photography. He was very pedantic, fastidious, and went over every word and phrase in the manuscript with a magnifying glass. In addition, Eric insisted that his wife, Gloria, who was a brilliant lawyer, review the manuscript. Indeed, Gloria became our *de facto* editor, and she edited every one of the manuscript’s 218 pages. Eric also insisted that Gloria review our agreement with the publisher. While I was ready

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

to sign the agreement with the publisher with my eyes closed, it took Gloria two weeks to review the agreement and to find a few clauses that she demanded be changed. To my astonishment, the publisher accepted all of Gloria's revisions!

In summary, I probably felt a special bond to Eric because of our shared life experience, because I have been spending a few months a year in Israel, remaining in touch with his daughter in Haifa, and because of our research together. And so went our wonderful friendship, which included a joint book that we edited and was published in 1997. Eric was excited about the project. The refugee issue had a special meaning for him. His parents and mine never enjoyed a refugee supporting network when they escaped occupied Europe. Hardly any doors were open to Jewish refugees. Jewish immigration was globally limited. During our Friday Hilton meetings I once asked Eric if he ever visited his home town in Germany. His answer was very clear; he would never set foot in Germany, and he would never buy a German car. He did go to Belgium once, after the war, to visit the family that hid him during the war, but it was a very disappointing experience. Eric never elaborated on his encounter with the family in Belgium, but I understood that they only took him in for money, not compassion. I told Eric about my traumatic trip to Poland; I visited the small village in Eastern Poland where my father was born and where his family had lived for hundreds of years. I knew that all my father's family members, including his sister's family, were burned alive inside the village synagogue, one day in 1941. No one survived. The fate of Eric's extended family was no different. But what shocked both of us was the world's attitude towards the Jewish refugees. The hundreds of thousands of Jews who survived the Holocaust but could not find refuge. The only door that opened up for the Jewish refugees was the newly created state of Israel.

Eric and I were changed by the horrors of the war. We both wanted to shine a light on the painful issue of refugees. We tried to find some answers and perhaps suggest some ways to help alleviate the pain of refugees, a subject that unfortunately refuses to leave us. Every year more refugees are added to the world. Every day more children lose their parents, homes, and often their lives. In his dedication to our book Eric wrote, "This book is dedicated to the Nachmias grandchild Nir Tomer, and to the Belgrad grandchildren Alex, Benjamin, Max, and Asher. May they grow up and flourish in a world free of war and filled with humanitarian concern." Let us hope and pray that Eric's words may one day become a reality.